



Saskatchewan  
Agriculture  
and Food

# Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building  
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

**Saskatchewan**

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Log Number: 07-47-198  
Week of November 19, 2007

## NEW LAB MEANS MORE LEADING EDGE RESEARCH AT WCVN

The opening of the new Westgen Research Suite at the University of Saskatchewan's Western College of Veterinary Medicine is another leap forward for a facility with a long track record of producing results for livestock producers in Saskatchewan.

WCVN dean Dr. Charles Rhodes says the new lab will provide an enhanced base for the work the college has been known for over the past 30 years.

"The suite is primarily going to be concerned with research related to animal reproduction," says Dr. Rhodes. "It will focus on the common livestock species such as cattle, swine, sheep and horses."

The name of the new research suite honours Western Canada's Genetics Centre, a B.C.-based non-profit society owned by producers which promotes the development and use of assisted reproduction in dairy herds. Westgen contributed \$640,000 toward the cost of the new laboratory building. Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada provided 60 per cent of overall funding, and the remainder was funded through Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food.

"This is a tremendous improvement for us at the college," says Dr. Rhodes. "It provides added space that we need for research and for graduate students. More importantly, it provides the very latest equipment and dedicated space to do really cutting-edge research in this area."

The Westgen Research Suite comprises facilities such as cell culture rooms, storage space for liquid nitrogen, and more than \$1.5 million in specialized equipment. It will also host scientists from the Canadian Animal Genetic Resources Centre, which is dedicated to preserving the diversity of genetics in Canadian farm livestock.

The new lab completes a research wing of some 1,468 square metres that is certified to handle lower-level biohazards such as food pathogens. It represents part of a multi-year expansion and renovation project at the college.

"Earlier this summer, we opened the Animal Care Unit, which is where we house the research animals - everything from mice to cattle," says Dr. Rhodes. "Beyond that, we have expansion of our clinical resources, and we're working on our diagnostic laboratory right now. It'll be a year and a half to two years before the entire project is completed."

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In all, some \$57 million will be spent to modernize and expand the WCVN facilities.

"We will have an increase of about 25 per cent in space and a renovation of a quarter of the existing space," says Dean Rhodes. "It's a huge, complex project, because we're trying to keep our clinics running, our diagnostics lab running, and our student teaching continues during the midst of all this."

The Western College of Veterinary Medicine today boasts enrolment of over 400 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled, and annual researching funding of more than \$10 million from both public and private sources.

"Really, what you're talking about is enabling good people to do good things," says Dr. Rhodes. "In order to attract outstanding students and outstanding staff you need to have the facilities and equipment that they can apply to modern research."

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## ALPACA BREEDERS WORKING TOGETHER TO BUILD NEW MARKETS

The young alpaca industry is pulling together through a provincial network and a national co-operative to find markets for their unique fibre product.

Alpacas are a domesticated version of a species that arose in the South American highlands, in the camelid family. They might be called "small llamas," in that they superficially look like a llama, but are much smaller. Unlike llamas, which are used as beasts of burden in their home countries, alpacas are raised only for their fibre.

"Alpacas were a hidden secret of Peru, Bolivia, and Chile for thousands of years," says Lynn Hilderman, who operates Country Vista Alpacas with her husband Don on a farm near Duval. "The first herds in North America and Australia only date back to the late 1980s."

Like sheep, alpacas are raised to be sheared, and their soft fibre is used for weaving various fabrics. Alpaca fibre grows in over 50 natural colours and many grades of softness and toughness.

"We shear them once a year, in April," says Lynn Hilderman. "It can be done anywhere from April to June. Then the new growth is enough to protect them from the summer sun, and there's lots of time to grow their heavier coats for winter."

The Hildermans are running some 36 head of their own, and caring for another 50 stock that will be sold on consignment for other producers. They have been in the alpaca business for 11 years.

"They are easy to raise," says Hilderman. "The animals are gentle, inquisitive, friendly, and intelligent. They don't eat much and don't require that much attention. They live up to 25 years and reproduce pretty much through their whole life cycle."

For producers, the challenge to make the industry viable is building markets. To that end, they have formed the Saskatchewan Alpaca Breeders Network ([www.sabn.net](http://www.sabn.net)), which represents a majority of the 50 active breeders in Saskatchewan.

"You can enter at many levels, from just keeping a couple of fibre-producing males, to a group of mixed females, to top quality bred females," says Hilderman.

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The SABN exists to share expertise and success stories and to promote alpaca fibre here at home and elsewhere. Members recently organized displays and sales at the Sask In Demand trade show held in Saskatoon, and their annual alpaca show was held in Nokomis.

Now alpaca breeders from across Canada are coming together in the Canadian Camelid Fibre Co-op ([www.cancamco-op.com](http://www.cancamco-op.com)) to market their product.

"The co-op was formed to provide quality assurance and uniform classes of fibre," says Lynn Hilderman. "This created certified classes of fibre so that you have consistency of colour and grade when it goes to the mill. As a result of the availability of large lots of uniform fibre, our products are now much softer and more durable."

Alpaca fibre is woven into a long list of products, from sweaters and scarves to insoles for winter boots. Hilderman says the industry continues to evolve, and the current players are looking for new entrants.

"We need more members supporting the co-op with more fibre," she says. "Canada is not a fibre-producing nation on the order of Australia or England, where their experience allows them to adapt to the market very quickly. We are still doing trial and error, although we have begun to produce some really beautiful Canadian-made alpaca products."

Hilderman welcomes inquiries from fellow producers, those interested in joining the industry, and anyone who would like to know more about alpaca fibre products.

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## LITTLE HORSES ARE A BIG PASSION FOR PARKBEG PRODUCERS

A mutual interest in miniature horses sparked a marriage and a 20 year business for Dennis and Donna Russell, operators of Double D Miniatures in Parkbeg.

"Donna got into them in 1981," says Dennis Russell. "I was working bigger horses and then a friend of mine bought some miniatures. She was showing them and I was showing for a friend of mine, and that's how we met and got married."

The result was the Double D operation, originally established in the Wolseley area, but now located in Parkbeg.

Miniature horses are literally small copies of the well known larger breeds. They represent everything from draft horse types to elegant Arabians in look and colour, and can be found with the look of the appaloosa, pinto and many other variations.

Miniatures are shown right across North America, and sold as pets, therapeutic animals, and often seen in parades, exhibitions and at petting zoos.

Dennis Russell has seen an evolution in the breeding towards a slimmer and longer legged animal.

"At one time they were short-legged," he says. "You buy good stallions to put some leg under them, and then they look like small versions of full-sized saddle horses rather than a short, stocky draft horse."

Standards for breeders are established by the American Miniature Horse Association, which sanctions shows, including the World Championship, across North America. Dennis and Donna Russell normally take in five or six shows per year, showing their horses in several categories. They are proud to have had a national championship with a stallion in the under-28 inches category at Tulsa in 2005.

The Russells are running about 50 head of miniatures, of which some five or six are being shown in any given year. Showing and selling are closely linked.

"You're trying to sell horses all the time," says Dennis. "The show circuit is in spring and summer, and the better you do, the more you can sell."

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The Russell herd includes stallions, mares, geldings and foals. They range from 25 to 32 inches in height at the shoulder, and come with names like "Shirley's Gem," "China Doll," and "Meadow Pussycat."

"We've made sales from the east coast to the west coast," says Donna Russell proudly. "Our horses went to Nova Scotia last year and to Washington state this January."

Many of the miniatures are sold as pets, which brings a price of several hundred dollars. Breeders looking for the best stock will pay thousands for the right animal. In Saskatchewan, there are at least 45 members of the provincial miniature horse club. Sales are generally conducted privately through contacts made at shows or on the Internet.

For the Russells, small is big. Along with the horses, they sell mini-carts in a sulkie style or even a tiny grain wagon, along with the harness required for the miniatures to pull the carts for shows or pleasure rides. They are also breeders of registered Yorkshire Terriers, the teacup-sized puppies that grow into the perfect lap dog.

They welcome inquiries about their horses, carts, and dogs at [www.doubledminiatures.com](http://www.doubledminiatures.com) or at 355-2399.

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For more information, contact:

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## WINTER FEED CONCERNS REQUIRE CAREFUL MANAGEMENT

You've cut and baled your available forages and put your feed grains into storage. But you're still concerned you might be tight for feed this winter, and your budget, as always, is pretty thin. What can you do about it?

Getting through the winter when feed for your herd is scarce and expensive means getting the most out of every forkful.

It is really an ongoing management strategy in well-run and profitable operations where production costs are constantly pared to the bone.

Planning ahead from the first sign of trouble for available winter feed – considering both quality and quantity – can get the bulk of the herd through the cold season without spending too much money or sacrificing productivity the following year.

In order to help cattle producers manage the challenging task of wintering a herd with a limited feed supply, the Farm Animal Council of Saskatchewan (FACS) has devoted one of its many "Cattle FACS" fact sheets to the subject.

"The information we provide through these fact sheets has been developed by committees of cattle care experts with specific knowledge in each of the topic areas covered," said FACS Executive Director Adele Buettner. "Our organization has offered to co-ordinate the effort, produce the material and make it as widely available to producers as possible."

The first strategy the fact sheet recommends is to match feed nutrients to animal needs. This means saving the best quality feed for after calving, and the next-best feed for 60 days before calving. Boosting feed during cold snaps is also necessary, particularly for young or thin cattle.

Segregating cattle by their feed requirements can reduce over- and under-feeding. For example, mature cows in good condition will need fewer nutrients than bred yearlings or rebred two year-old heifers.

"Animal feed experts always advise producers to test, don't guess," said Dr. Murray Jelinski, FACS director and veterinarian at the University of Saskatchewan. "In other words, feed test and balance rations based on actual nutrients in the feed." Vitamins, minerals, protein supplements and mixed-in grain should be introduced as required, particularly for young, growing or thin cattle.

(more)

The second strategy recommended in the information is to minimize the herd's overall feed requirements. For example, use herd records to identify and keep only the best breeding cows or replacement heifers. Pregnancy test and consider culling open cows, hard calvers, poor mothers or those with bad feet, legs, udders, eyes or temperament.

Employ a body condition scoring system to manage the herd's rations, and manage feed to reduce waste. "This could include something as simple as feeding on clean snow, feeding under a hot wire, or grinding and mixing with more palatable roughages," Jelinski said. "Whatever works to get your cattle through the winter."

Experts also suggest treating for external parasites such as lice and warbles, since they lessen a cow's health and increase feed requirements. Internal parasites may also be worth treating, on the advice of a veterinarian.

The third strategy recommended in the fact sheet is to maximize the value of the feed supply. Supplement low-quality roughages like mature range grass, slough hay, stubble and straw. They are too low in protein (and energy, minerals and vitamins) to support sufficient microbial growth in the rumen for optimal digestion.

"Evidence shows that proper supplementation of nutrients and grain will allow animals to get much more value out of the same feed," Jelinski stated. "When formulating rations, it's always a good idea for producers to consult their veterinarians, a provincial agriculture specialist or an animal nutritionist."

Feed experts note that grinding coarse or poor quality feeds can increase feed value by increasing intake. Mixing with moderate quality roughages will increase palatability and dilute anti-nutritive factors like nitrates, as well.

The Cattle FACS fact sheet on how to manage a herd through winter feed shortages can be obtained from the Farm Animal Council of Saskatchewan's website at [www.facs.sk.ca](http://www.facs.sk.ca) or by calling 249-3227.

There are a number of other good resources on the subject, including the websites of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, the Western Beef Development Centre and the Prairie Feed Resource Centre of the University of Saskatchewan. Another good source of information are the livestock nutrition experts at the SAF Agriculture Knowledge Centre. They can be reached toll-free at 1-866-457-2377.

FACS is a membership-based, non-profit organization that represents the livestock industry in advancing responsible welfare, care and handling practices in agriculture. It endeavours to raise producer awareness of the economic and ethical benefits of animal welfare and to help consumers achieve a greater understanding of animal care issues.

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